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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH MEDIA REPS TO HEAR
HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF MEDIA CONCERNS

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Accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met with a group of journalists and representatives of independent media outlets on April 17 at their request to hear their concerns regarding recent actions of law enforcement bodies against independent media, such as intimidation, detention and beatings of journalists. The group included directors of two major independent newspapers, two media NGOs, one regional newspaper editor and one radio station.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Val Butnaru, Director of the independent "Jurnal de Chisinau" newspaper, briefed the Ambassador on several recent cases when his journalists covering the protests were detained by police and unidentified men in plain clothes. He described the case of the editor in chief of "Jurnal de Chisinau," Rodica Mahu, who on April 10 was reporting on the ongoing events by phone on the events near the main government building. Suddenly, several men dressed in civilian clothing approached her and forced her into a car and took her to a police station for questioning. She was interrogated for several hours and was accused of being involved in organizing the actions that destroyed the parliamentary and presidential buildings and of planning an attack on the government building. She rejected all the accusations and tried to explain that she was just doing her job - reporting on the events happening at that moment. The director of "Jurnal de Chisinau" believes that Mahu was released only because her detention immediately received very wide coverage on the major news websites.

¶3. (SBU) The director of "Jurnal de Chisinau" also informed the Ambassador about a case when one of his journalists was beaten by the police and his camera confiscated, while he was filming the protest near the parliamentary building. Afterwards, the police released him, but conducted a search in his house and confiscated his tapes and DVDs.

¶4. (SBU) The director of the independent "Ziarul de Garda" newspaper, Alina Radu, told the Ambassador how her journalists were beaten by the police while reporting on the protests and taking still photographs. She said that she witnessed this from the window of her office in the press building and when she went down to intercede she was also roughed up. When she then asked government doctors who were standing nearby to help tend to the injuries of the journalists, the doctors refused to take care of the injured,

saying that their job was to treat policemen, not "ordinary people."

¶5. (SBU) The editor in chief of the Balti-based newspaper "SP," Slava Perunov, complained that the pro-government media launched a campaign to discredit him and his publication, because he is not supporting the ruling Party of Communists. He also received death threats.

¶6. (SBU) The journalists present at the meeting also claimed that their media websites were blocked by the authorities on the day of the protest. They expressed serious concern regarding freedom of the media and of expression in Moldova, saying they did not exclude the possibility of further harassment and/or detentions of journalists who hold views different from the Communists. They said that they believed that a "reign of fear" had been instituted in the country.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador assured the group of USG support for freedom of the media and expression and said that he had mentioned this repeatedly during his meetings with Moldovan government officials.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) All the media representatives present at the meeting are well-known and respected members

of the media community. The Embassy has had long-standing and trustful working relationships with all the newspapers, radio stations and NGOs they represent. Most are grantees and/or have participated in U.S. Government-sponsored exchange programs. Their accounts are trustworthy and credible. Many of the details provided are corroborated and supported through numerous other reports about the treatment of journalists during and after the protests. Post is concerned that media freedoms, which were already limited prior to the elections have now suffered another blow. Now that the elections are over, governmental pressure on independent media outlets in the form of removing broadcast licenses could be reactivated. The creation of an atmosphere of fear has created a potent deterrent to independent media voices and has set back media development in Moldova.

CHAUDHRY